

# THE SUMMER GENERAL WINTER CAME

## 冬將軍來的夏天

When pain and misfortune seemingly escalate beyond the limits of reality, a twisted and unreal narrative may be best suited to describe them. In this unsettling novel of contemporary unreality, author Kan Yao-Ming resurrects the dead to defend the living.

Kindergarten teacher Huang Li-Hua gets drunk at a staff party and is raped by a male colleague. She goes immediately to the police, and from there to court, but her difficulty in proving the sex was non-consensual leads to frustration, failure, and ridicule. Unable to bear the hostile stares of those around her, Huang Li-Hua tries her best to abandon her life and environs.

Her only protector in the process turns out to be her long-dead grandmother, whose spirit appears, folded in a trunk, three days before Li-Hua's assault. Once released, Li-Hua's grandmother brings Li-Hua into strange company: the "Past Lives Society," a group of dead old women who travel around convincing lonely elderly souls to join them. On the road, the women share the stories of their lives and deaths, stories that will change Li-Hua's own life forever.

Dark clouds loom over Kan Yao-Ming's unreal world, in which brutality and loneliness are frequent visitors. Yet in it we see how tragedy can serve as antidote to tragedy, and how narrative provides the energy for sustaining life.

### Kan Yao-Ming 甘耀明

Kan Yao-Ming is hailed as Taiwan's foremost "Neo Nativist" writer, successfully mixing farce, tall tales, folk legend and collective memories to create his own uniquely magic realist world. Like a magician of words, he writes with a highly experimental but always accessible style. Kan's reputation was first built on two collections of short stories, *The Mysterious Train*, and *The School of The Water Spirit*, and later *Tales at a Funeral*. His works have won numerous awards and is often chosen for "Best of the Year" anthologies. He is two-time winner of the China Times Open Book Award.



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By Kan Yao-Ming

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

That summer, Grandma climbed out of the wooden chest in the living room, and formally entered our household.

After I got back from being examined at the hospital, I told Mother I wanted a companion to get me through the court case, and that person was Grandma. "The reason you hallucinate 'that woman' in the living room isn't a coincidence, she wouldn't appear unless you were thinking of her."

"Oh please, that was just a stray thought," my mother retorted. "I'm always saying 'to hell with it,' but that doesn't mean I want visitors *from* Hell, especially not 'that woman.'"

"I miss Granny, I really do," I said.

"We haven't set eyes on each other for more than ten years." Mother was silent for a while. "All right! To hell with it, unless she really has some sort of unearthly power and can appear just like that."

I walked over to the wooden chest and flung the lid open to reveal Grandma, neatly folded within. Mother was terrified, her gaze plunging into the emptiness of a person unaccustomed to illusion. She clutched at her hair and sighed deeply, letting out all the unhappiness within. "Now I'm in for it," she yelled.

Of course, this made no sense; nor did Grandma.

Grandma was silent in the box, her body still neatly stacked so her legs bent over her shoulders with her feet by her ears, her hands tucked behind her bum, her whole body filling the space as perfectly as pickled vegetables in a jar, leaving no air at all. Her eyes were full of life, wide open and staring out at the world from that squashed face. The abrupt opening of the chest wasn't a reunion Grandma and her former daughter-in-law were prepared for, and their relationship could only be an unwholesome one.

Unfolding herself, Grandma stuck her head out of the box. Querulously, she said, "I heard it all. Everything you said about me."

"And I see you. So?" Mother was holding a cigarette. She normally only smoked on the balcony, but was now so stressed she didn't care which room she was in.

"I didn't miss a single sentence. Not a single word."

"That sounds bad."

"You've never had one good word for me," said Grandma. "If you spent that much time in this chest, you'd hear plenty of bad things about yourself too, of course."

"What did I say about you?"

"I haven't forgotten, I just wanted to make you repeat it all. Don't worry, I've been cultivating myself. Say it again, and maybe you'll feel better. You could start with how stingy I used to be. I'll admit I could often be like that. It's completely fair."

"Those are all tiny incidents, not worth mentioning." Mother took a long drag, sucking in both her cheeks violently, looking uneasy.

"Say it! You'll feel better when you've said it. Come on, tell us about these old scores!"

Mother took another drag on her cigarette, with the look of someone throwing caution to the winds, and put her foot on the gas. She said, when she was in her confinement month after giving birth, Grandma went through the gifts that arrived, ripping open packages and picking through them, taking away anything she had a use for. A box of Japanese peaches got whisked away, with the excuse that new mothers shouldn't eat "cooling" foods. Same with a blanket, which she claimed was unsuitable for an infant. The SebaMed, Benber, and Les Enphants brand bath sets were taken too, as they were "incomplete." Then the necklaces and other gold jewelry from Mother's own family were tucked away. Grandma said it was for safekeeping, but somehow that became taking them for herself.

"That's all true. What else?"

"There's more!" Mother pressed her victory, and brought up Grandma's policy of laundry only once every three days, so the clothes got all moldy and set off Mother's allergies. Then there were the other rules: don't open the fridge more than five times a day; no air conditioning except on the sweatiest summer days; lights off and bedtime before 11 p.m., and a strict \$500 limit on daily expenditures, with frequent inspections of her bankbook for any larger withdrawals.

"Also, no phone calls longer than two minutes, time limits on TV viewing, only so many lamps on at the same time. Is that all?"

"Of course that's not all!" But Mother suddenly grew cautious, and changed her tune. "I'm done."

"Now you've got that off your chest, you'll feel better."

"No such luck."

"I have a story about that." Grandma shot me a look. "There's a type of baby that's born with the soul of its past life. It only loses that soul at eight or nine months, when it learns to speak. The legend is that before they start talking, these babies have the spirit of 'the listening tree.'"

Mother's frosty expression suddenly thawed, and a faint smile crossed her face. It only lasted a second, and if I hadn't happened to be looking at her, I wouldn't have noticed that momentary flicker of happiness before her icy look returned.

"The listening tree?" I tried to get her to go on.

"When something bad happens that you can't talk to anyone about, you go into the forest, find a big tree with a hole in it, and speak all your unhappiness into that hole, until you feel better, until you've cheered yourself up. Then you fill in the hole with dirt."

I'd heard of listening trees. This story was quite common, though its origins were impossible to trace. Anyway, it's the sort of anecdote that appears in self-help books; I could find

a dozen examples in any library. As for the point of this story, it's not about pouring your painful secrets out to the tree, but receiving the healing energy of the forest as you search for it.

Grandma said, "Listening trees eventually get sick and die. After helping countless people, and earning their full measure of good karma, they receive permission from the Buddha to be reincarnated as humans. They become little babies, but retain the special characteristics of their listening-treehood, right up until they learn to talk. And so, adults can tell their deepest secrets to these kids who don't yet have language."

"And?" I said.

"You were a listening tree," said Grandma. "You were definitely too young to remember any of that, but we do. Your mom would tell you all kinds of things, and so would your dad. You were their listening tree."

My cheeks broadened in a smile. Mother had never told me any of this, and if Grandma hadn't mentioned it, the entire story would surely have dispersed like smoke. This fragment of the past made me think of other things. I'd been through all the phases of childhood: a little kid constantly clamoring to know "why do leaves fall in the autumn?" and "why is the elephant's nose so long?"; then a middle school student, screaming "Go to Hell!" as I snacked on candies and raisins; then a high school student, headphones clamped permanently over my ears and refusing to hear the world. None of these things would prevent me from getting my listening abilities back. But I had been too eager to speak, to have other people hear my words.

"I've been cultivating myself. I have listening tree powers now," said Grandma, nodding. "The longer I live, the more I become like a little child."

"And me?" Mother demanded shrilly. "I'm nothing at all, I'm not cultivated enough to face a tree, or even to see what's so cultivated about a tree like you."

"I suppose I'm not able to show a more enlightened side of myself, but I do have listening abilities. At least I can now hear you out without getting angry," said Grandma.

"Fine! So you have the cultivation of a tree, but that doesn't mean I must. I'm certain that the two of us can't live under the same roof. It's too dangerous. You might not lose your mind, but I will."

Mother drew a line in the sand. It didn't matter if Grandma had learned to be superb at contortion or being a listening tree, nothing was going to fix their relationship. Past arguments guaranteed that. Life is never that neat. After all, if you yank a carrot out of the ground, you can't just stick it back into the same hole again; if you tried, it wouldn't grow, and might even die. Mother was willing to beat a hasty retreat and temporarily move in with her boyfriend, so I could be with Grandma.

"But the main reason," said Mother just before she stepped out the door, "is that you believe I killed your son. You'll never see me as anything other than a murderer. Isn't that right?"

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The cassia trees were in full bloom when I left my kindergarten teaching job.

The cassias grew by the sand pit, and in early summer would droop with strings of flowers that the slightest breeze made rain down golden petals, beautiful against the pale sand.

The kids called these trees “pig intestines,” because the seeds came in long, pitch-black pods. They’d creep up behind someone and say, “Hey, you dropped something.” When the victim turned round, they’d hold a pod high and holler, “Your pig intestine dropped out of your bum.” Even visitors and the principal got pranked in this way.

This trick and the nickname for the pods were invented by Rook. He also caused an incident by opening some of the ripe ones, and scraping the black goo inside into a pot to make a “witch’s brew,” which he then invited his friends to sample, claiming it would give them Pikachu’s “100,000-volt” kung fu skills. Only thing was, if any of them dared to breathe a word about it, they’d dissolve into foam in a cesspit, just like the little mermaid.

The cassia fruit tastes sweet, and causes mild diarrhea when eaten, though it’s otherwise non-toxic. After school, a dozen bums so youthful their Mongolian spot birthmarks hadn’t faded yet gushed their inner contents into a dozen bathrooms at home, and not one of them daring to mention the “witch’s brew,” for fear of turning into the yellow scum floating atop the toilet bowl. Their parents suspected some sort of stomach flu and rushed them to hospital, where the doctors said bowel diseases don’t lead to diarrhea, and this was probably food poisoning.

The parents discussed this in their Line group, and came to the conclusion that the kindergarten must be to blame, and probably hadn’t been handling food properly. The principal held a parents’ meeting and wrote two letters of apology. When they still weren’t able to trace the source of the illness, a kitchen worker was fired to appease their anger. The children were pleased with the results of the “witch’s brew” and also with how well they’d kept this secret. This morphed into an urban legend that “eating pudding and instant ramen at the same time gives you the shits.” Afterwards, though, Rook told me the truth. He’d never kept any secrets from me.

One Monday in July, as the cassia blossoms swung from the branches and blanketed the sand pit, the kids were playing a treasure-hunting game below the trees, seeing who could dig up the most Minions, which were buried deep in the sand. The teacher who was with them said even if they dug right through the whole planet and ended up in America, they’d have to find the Minions there too. No stopping till they’d unearthed them all. Their childish whoops rang non-stop through the air. There was nothing they liked better than playing treasure-hunt in the sandbox.

Rook tossed his shovel aside, yelled that he had a stomachache, and hurtled off towards the toilet.

I noticed he’d hidden all the Minions he’d found so far in his pocket, and was sure this was some kind of ruse. I followed him to investigate.

Rook ran past the toilet towards the storeroom, opening the three-digit combination lock without any trouble. The lock wasn’t much of a deterrent, anyway; the combination was carved into the door frame at an adult’s eye level. They’d only installed it three years ago, after a few kids broke in to steal some whiteboard marker ink, which they smeared all over the school and themselves.

I peeped through the window and saw Rook frantically searching the dusty storeroom. Maybe he wanted a hiding place for the Minions in his pocket, so he could make up yet another story about how they'd been swallowed by the pit.

I walked in. "Need any help?"

Seeing it was me, he dropped his guard and kept searching. "Where are the pig intestines?"

Each spring, we gathered all the ripe cassia pods and kept them in the storeroom, for use in art class – the kids stuck them into scrapbooks, made decorative borders around notice boards, or lined them up like train tracks. There were all sorts of things you could do with them.

"Was it you who pulled off the ones on the notice board?" I now asked.

"Yes!"

"You must already have quite a few. But you still need some more?"

"I do!"

"What for?"

"To make a new batch of witch's brew. A bigger one."

"And what will you do with your witch's brew?" Remembering the last occasion, I grew alert.

"It's a secret. I can't tell you."

"I thought you told me everything."

"It's good for people to have secrets, now and then. My daddy always yells at my mommy for looking at his phone without permission. He says she doesn't respect his privacy." Rook frowned. "Privacy means secrets. My daddy has secrets, and so do I. Grown-ups have secrets. Having no secrets means you're just a kid."

"Ah! Rook, you've grown up." I looked at him, thinking how he would soon graduate kindergarten and enter elementary school, which wouldn't be that much of a change, but Rook himself was transforming. He smiled much less than before, and was becoming warier.

"How about this," he said, looking up at me. "Let's play swapping secrets. We'll trade ideas. It's fair that way."

I agreed. This was a little game, and I'd be able to hold my own.

"What is rape?" he asked.

Something tightened around my heart. This was a difficult question to answer, and had quite a lot to do with myself. "Where did you hear that word?"

"My mommy said it."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say it to me, she was chatting with the other moms and I heard. She said there was a rape case in the snake pit. It sounded really bad," said Rook. The "snake pit" was our staff room, which the kids described as "a place where teachers twine together like poisonous snakes."

I hesitated for a few seconds, wondering if I ought to answer.

"What is rape?" he asked again.

I took a deep breath. "Everyone wears underpants to cover up the parts they pee from. That's privacy, a place we have to keep secret. You can't let anyone else touch, and you can't let anyone else look."

"So touching or peeping at someone else's cock is rape."

"Not quite, but close."

"So when us boys are peeing, and we look at each other's cocks, and we touch them, is that rape?"

"Not like that. You're just horsing around. But apart from you boys being mischievous, or when your parents are giving you a bath, no one else should touch you there. Just touching isn't rape, though it is risqué."

"Being touched is risky?" Rook seemed confused by the similarity in the words. I stifled a laugh and was just about to correct him, when he revealed something startling. "I've been riskied. It was so risky!"

"What do you mean?"

"Big Hornet riskied me."

"What happened?" That gave me a fright, and I wondered what on earth Liao Ching-Shao had done to him.

Rook said that on several occasions during swim class, Liao Jing-Shao shot rubber bands at their cocks, fortunately from far enough away that they didn't land too hard. Then when they were getting changed, Liao Jing-Shao would come in without his swim trunks on, and yell at them to hurry up. If they didn't get their underpants on quick, their cocks would fly away. Rook yelled back, you're not wearing underpants either! Liao Jing-Shao said his cock was fully grown, so it wouldn't fly away. Then he bragged, "And by the way, your little cocks should get a look at a real bird of prey." Another time, Rook was too slow getting changed, and Liao Jing-Shao came over without his underpants to hurry him. When he turned to walk away, his bird of prey smacked into Rook's face.

"But he didn't mean to do that!" I said carefully.

"That's what he said too, but he was laughing all the time he said sorry. Hmph! I think he did it on purpose," said Rook, swabbing at his right cheek in anger, as if there was some residue that wouldn't come off.

I didn't doubt Rook's words. Liao Jing-Shao was our swimming coach, and this behavior was definitely out of line. Rook ought to have said something to the kindergarten management, his parents, or the other teachers, but he hadn't. It was clear that his instincts told him this was just a game between Liao Jing-Shao and him. Yet something must have happened recently to make him see it differently. I was sure it had to do with me.

"I've been riskied, and I've been raped," said Rook.

"How?" I asked, anxiously.

"When Big Hornet hit me with his cock, that was rape." Rook swabbed at the invisible mark on his face again. "I went online to look up rape, and I snuck a look at my mom's Line account on her phone."

"You know?"

"I know that you...were...raped." Rook bit his lip, and looked even sadder than when he was talking about himself getting violated. "What Big Hornet did was terrible."

"So you were searching for the pig intestines to avenge me."

"I wanted to drive King Snake and Big Hornet out of this kindergarten. I wanted their intestines to explode," Rook sobbed, tears gliding down his tender cheeks. "I Googled it. In ancient times, if a woman almost got raped, but actually it only touched her hand, she'd think her hand was dirty and chop it off. And in countries like India, people who get raped are killed. And in Taiwan, rape victims have to keep apart from other people and live somewhere far away."

"That won't happen."

"It's true, the internet said so. You'll leave the kindergarten, and feel stupid, so you'll hide away somewhere far off. All day long, you'll cry and cry. And then I'll never see you again."

"That won't happen." Now I was weeping too.

"If I get rid of Big Hornet and King Snake, then you can stay."

My eyes were so full of tears that I could no longer see the little boy. At this point, the only thing worth celebrating in the world was that along with the waves of sorrow, warmth sometimes came to me too. This told me that no matter how long the road ahead was, I would be able to keep walking.

\*

If you want to know what Hell feels like, the district prosecutor's office is a short cut there.

For half a month, I'd been sprinting through the legal system: getting examined at the hospital, giving a statement down at the precinct, and then telling the whole story again in court. Prosecutor Wu was in charge of my case. He was about a decade older than I, and looked like the sort of regular man you see walking down the street at lunchtime with his take-out food in a plastic bag. He spoke quickly, and didn't look up at me like the female detective had when she was taking my statement, to make sure I was keeping up.

Inspector Wu put every detail of the whole experience under a microscope. For instance, "Did Mr. Liao Jing-Shao first remove your skirt or your blouse?" Had I "engaged in oral sex with him, or vice versa?" or "did he insert any objects, such as a vibrator, into your vagina?" Also, "did you change positions halfway?" and "how long did the intercourse last?" I answered that I was drunk, and didn't have a clear recollection, but as I said in my statement and my spoken testimony, I was struggling and screaming "no" the whole time, though my resistance did no good. All in all, I spent a whole hour in that office answering questions, returning to that awful experience. Inspector Wu's scalpel-like interrogation sent shivers down my spine like police sirens do. Despite the air conditioning, my armpits and forehead kept sweating.

Every time I thought about this afterwards, whenever I heard a police siren sounding like it was on its way to an accident, like a summons from Inspector Wu, I'd have to sit down and breathe deeply.